DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 109 671 CS 202 142

AUTHOR Verble, David
TITLE A Road Not Taken: An Approach to Teaching Poetry.
INSTITUTION Nashville - Davidson County Metropolitan Public Schools, Tenn.; Tennessee Arts Commission, Nashville.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 73
NOTE 88p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$4.43 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Creative Teaching; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Language Arts; *Literary Analysis; *Poetry; *Teaching Methods; *Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS *Poets in the Schools

ABSTRACT

A way in which poetry can be successfully approached in the classroom is discussed in this book about teaching poetry. It presents a method by which teachers can teach students to read poems rather than teaching them about poems. The first chapter discusses and criticizes the "what-does-this-poem-mean" approach to teaching poetry. The second chapter discusses giving students a new view of poems and of themselves as readers. A series of questions is provided for the purpose of helping students explore certain poems and their involvement with those poems. Chapter three discusses teaching poetry on the first day of class. Chapter's four, five, and six discuss, respectively, the second, third, and fourth days of class. Chapter seven offers suggestions for using this approach in the classroom. (TS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

A ROAD NOT TAKEN

an approach to teaching poetry

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

by

David Verble

Nashville
Poetry-in-Schools Program
1973

BEST AVAILABLE COPY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge my gratitude to the poets and publishers whose work is featured in this book. The privilege of drawing from their publications is greatly appreciated.

This book is funded by the Tennessee Arts Commission and the Metropolitan Nashville Public School System as a part of the Poet-in-Schools Program in Nashville which is a joint effort by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the Metropolitan Nashville Public School System. A word of special thanks must go to Mrs. Elizabeth Burgess, Language Arts Supervisor for the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, and Mr. Gordon Holl, Arts Program Director for the Tennessee Arts Commission, who made this work possible through their encouragement and support.

my love and thanks
to Margaret and Valerie
for their help and understanding

Cover design by A.T. Stephens

Published 1973 by David Verble
for the Tennessee Arts Commission
and the Poet-in-Schools Program
Nashville, Tennessee

Cover by Hessey Printing Company
Text printed by Milton Selby

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Chapter One *(the old way)*	9
Chapter Two *(the new way)*	19
Chapter Three *(the first class)*	33
Chapter Four *(the second class)*	47
Chapter Five *(the third class)*	61
Chapter Six *(the fourth class)*	75
Chapter Seven *(suggestions)*	87
Bibliography	92

for Stephen Mooney

INTRODUCTION

This book is for teachers who teach poetry. But it is not a poetry handbook or a manual of teaching instructions. The title says it is about an approach to teaching poetry but that is not its real purpose. This book is actually about a way to avoid teaching poetry.

I am not sure there is a way to teach poetry. Too much of what happens between poem and reader takes place outside the teacher's control. We try to teach a poem and end up teaching its parts because we can never catch the poem itself in the things we teach students about poetry.

This book discusses a way in which I think poetry can successfully be approached in the classroom. Its subject is how poems can be read. It offers a way to approach poems without teaching them.

I did not set out to find a new approach to poetry by myself. As Poet-in-the-Schools for Nashville, I worked with many of the English teachers in the system and I found most were trying to break out of the traditional mode of teaching poetry. Each in her own way was trying to make poems more acceptable to students. This book is particularly for the teachers who made that effort.

I am offering an alternative to the traditional approach for teaching poetry. I do not maintain my way is the only correct way to approach poems. Neither am I asking teachers to reject the old methods completely. But I am suggesting that the traditional approach is not enough. Thus, I am trying here to show teachers a way to work with poems that touches areas not covered by the traditional methods.

In developing a new approach to poems it was necessary to be critical of the old approach. Many of those ideas are expressed in this book. I want to make clear that my criticism is not directed at the teachers who use the traditional approach. I know that many of them recognize the weaknesses in the approach and have tried to help their students get around them. We all have the same desire

to make poems believable for students.

While this book is written for teachers, it is centered around students. Thus, I have not tried to make this approach anything more specialized than simply a way to read poems. I feel that such things as critical approaches and poetic theories only get between students and poems, and enough distance exists between those two poles already. This approach does nothing more than provide a way to make poems available to students.

One more comment on the approach itself is necessary. I hope that no one will think I am trying to present this new approach as an ultimate way to work with poems. I can only offer teachers the beginnings of an alternative method. I am suggesting my ideas and methods of presentation with the expectation that each teacher will adapt them to her particular situation.

Finally, I must say that this book is also for me. Writing it helps answer some of my needs as a teacher. Poetry has been a dead subject in English classes for too long. I hope that through this book I am doing something to help make poems come alive for students.

CHAPTER ONE

(the old way)

I

The approach to poems which is discussed in this book took shape in the usual process of creation. It was mothered by necessity and fathered by an accumulation of ideas from a number of sources relating to poetry. I was merely the midwife running around trying to make sure all the parts came together. This approach came into being and grew because it was needed to satisify the requirements of a particular situation. As I explain the approach I hope it will be clear that the child has outgrown its origins and is struggling to accomodate itself to other teaching situations.

In the fall of 1971 I was given a job teaching poetry in the Nashville high schools. In accepting the position, I accepted that I would be committed to the primary purpose of the Poet-in--the-Schools Program which was the improvement of student attitudes toward poetry. By taking that purpose as my own, I accepted that my work would take the direction of not merely attempting to enrich the existing situation but attempting to change it significantly as well.

The program's purpose of trying to improve student attitudes toward poetry is based on the following three assumptions: that the attitudes need improving, that the attitudes can be improved, and that something needs to be done that is not being done as the means to that improvement. I had no problem accepting these three assumptions because I agree with them fully.

Very few English teachers have escaped confrontation with the statement, "I don't like poetry." While the statement by no means represents the attitudes of all students, it does seem to appear with discouraging frequency in almost every classroom and is far more

prevalent than any incident of open enthusiasm. Even those classes not dominated by an active dislike of poetry generally display an equally disheartening attitude of discontent or unconcern. Given this situation, suffice it to say that I feel that student attitudes toward poetry could stand some improving.

I am also convinced their attitudes can be improved. To think otherwise seems to imply to me that either the students are hopeless beyond change or that poems themselves are of no value to the students, and I do not accept either of those implications. I cannot believe that any student is beyond hope; it goes against my basic grain as a teacher. And when I look at the time and money students spend on popular music - itself a basic form of poetic expression - I cannot help but think that poetry has some value to students. And that it is thus possible to improve their attitudes toward poetry in the classroom.

I was forced to accept the third assumption because I has accepted the first two. If the negative attitudes do not exist because of faults in the students or in their abilities to respond to poetic expression, then there must be some aspect of the situation in which we present poems that is off target. Since I was not willing to admit that all teachers are bad any more than I was willing to admit all students are bad, I had to look to the methods by which poems are approached to try to solve the problem. In looking, I found that most teachers use the same basic approach in their presentation of poetry. Thus, I settled on that method, the "what does this poem mean" approach, as the aspect of the situation that needed to be reevaluated as a means of improving student attitudes.

In the following sections of this chapter I will discuss the "what does this poem mean" approach and some of the problems inherent in it. To keep the evaluation in perspective with the needs of the situation which necessitated it, I will also look at specific student complaints about the method and some of the needs these complaints reveal. It seems of little value to me to attempt a change without first establishing firmly the problem in the existing situation. I hope as the reader follows this discussion she will evaluate what I say in terms of her own experience in the classroom, and perhaps, in terms of her own frustration.

When I went to the classroom to look at the "meaning" approach in action, I went with the assumption that the approach is not used just for the teacher's convenience and enjoyment. I assumed that any approach to poems used in the classroom is intended to benefit the students, and I wanted to find out how much benefit the students felt they were getting. Since the students were on the receiving end of the approach I was witnessing, I thought they should know better than anyone if it was working. No teaching method fulfills its purpose in the classroom if it works for the teacher and fails for the student.

I made a second assumption in looking at the students' responses. It seems reasonable to expect that any classroom approach to poetry should have as its major benefit getting students interested in poetry. Or failing to create interest, the least that could be expected is that the approach would make poetry acceptable to the students. If the use of an approach causes a significant number of students to reject poetry, it does not seem unfair to conclude that the approach is not working as it should.

With these basic assumptions in mind, I simply asked students how they liked poetry. The answer I got from most was just as simple, they didn't. It was obvious something was wrong, but I wanted to know more. I next asked the question that every teacher has used when faced with a flat rejection of poetry. I asked, why?

The responses I got from students as to why they didn't like poetry were amazingly consistent. Most of their reasons could be lumped under the following three basic headings: "because I don't like studying it"; "because I can't understand it"; and "because my interpretation is never right." Other than the similarity, the outstanding thing I noticed in their answers was that their dislike was directed less at poetry than at what they were asked to do with it in class. Each of the three basic responses seemed to touch on some essential area of the "meaning" approach. I took the three basic reasons the students gave for not liking poetry and compared them to the methods used in the "meaning" approach. I have developed the following outline to give a general indication of how student attitudes are connected to the way in which they were asked to approach poetry.

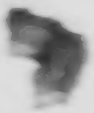
"I don't like poetry. . .

because I don't like studying it." This response seems to refer to the emphasis the "meaning" approach places on analysis or explication as the way to appreciate poems. Other responses that fit under this heading are: "I don't like taking poems apart" and "Why can't we just read poems?

because I can't understand it." This response seems to be related to the heavy emphasis given to reducing the poem to a prose statement as the way of deriving some value from it. Two other responses that belong under this heading are: "I can't see any of that stuff in them" and "Why don't they say what they mean?

because my interpretation is never right." This response seems to be directly connected to the approach's insistence that the poem must be whittled down to a single exact meaning. Other responses of the same nature are: "My ideas don't matter" and "Why is the teacher always right?

Since in each of these cases the students were rejecting poetry because they objected to the way in which it was taught, I came away from talking to students about poetry certain that the "meaning" approach needed improving. I not only learned that the approach tended to turn students against poetry, I also learned why.



3

In the preceding sections I have made free and frequent use of a phrase, the "what does this poem mean" approach, as though it were an established term in poetry. So before going on in my discussion, I want to define the specific approach to poetry I am referring to in using that term. I should point out that I am not talking about the methods of any particular teacher but rather am trying to give a general description of the basic approach I feel most teachers use.

The "what-does-this-poem-mean" approach refers to the predominate way of reading and studying poetry used in the high schools since the 1950's. The approach is often described by other terminology, such as: "analyzing poems," "explicating poems,"

and "interpreting poems." It is the approach to poetry that is explained in almost every literature textbook and poetry handbook written in the past thirty years. And it is the same approach a teacher is using when she begins class study of a poem by asking, "What do you think this poem means?" or "What do you think this poem is saying?"

Indicating that the "meaning" approach is the most common approach in use does not fully describe it. The reasons for its use tell even more about its nature. The method is essentially a high school version of the critical approach to literature taken in most college English courses. Teachers use it because that is what they were taught to do with poems, and the assumption behind the approach, on any level, is that the way best to appreciate poetry is to learn to criticize it. Most high school teachers I worked with recognize the fallacy in this type of thinking and admit simply that they use the approach to better prepare students for college.

The "meaning" approach actually involves two steps in teaching poetry. Before the student begins to consider individual poems, he is taught to recognize the parts and form of a poem. He is given a number of training exercises in identifying the various poetic devices. Most teachers have given up teaching verse scansion as part of the preparation for studying poetry, but the students are expected to learn to recognize similies, metaphors, personification, onomatopoeia, assonance, and all the other sound and image devices. When the student has been satisfactorily drilled on the parts and forms of poems, he is ready to study poetry.

In the second step of the "meaning" approach, the student is shown the course he must follow to develop an understanding of an individual poem. He is told that each poem has a meaning which he too can find by analyzing the words and lines of the poem and by searching for the poetic devices he has learned to recognize. He is also told that his study of a poem should result in a prose statement of what the poem is saying. In being able to reduce the poem to a clear and concise definition of its meaning, the student shows that he has understood and appreciated the poem and thus derived some value from it.

In the outline that follows, I have tried to present the basic classroom procedure used in the "meaning" approach. I think the outline represents in a general way the methods most teachers use and expect their students to utilize as the way to approach poetry.

The "what-does-this-poem-mean" Approach

1. The students are assigned the poem to read before class.
2. The students are expected to come to class having read, analyzed and reflected on the poem on their own.
3. The teacher may or may not read the poem aloud to the class.
4. The teacher begins the class study of the poem by asking the students what they think the poem is saying and what parts of the poem support their interpretation.
5. The teacher then has the class go through the poem by lines or sentences and say what each means. It may also be necessary to define the meanings of individual words.
6. The teacher next has the class point out and discuss the important symbols and poetic devices in the poem.
7. The teacher may also ask the students to describe the tone of the poem.
8. The teacher ends the study of the poem by helping the students state the meaning of the poem in a prose sentence.
9. The teacher goes on the next poem.

Through out the class study of the poem the teacher acts as sort of a monitor in helping the students find the right meanings and arrive at the correct interpretation. The students learn how to analyze poems by being shown how to develop their incomplete understandings into the right ones.

With the procedure of the "meaning" approach laid out for inspection, one problem stands out immediately. The students are given very little room in which to maneuver as they try to develop their individual appreciations and understandings of poetry. The teacher stands as the final authority on which interpretations are right or wrong. Thus, it seems that much of the essential excitment of reading poetry is lost for the students. The joy of discovery is lessened by the ever present voice of the teacher making corrections. Perhaps the basic reason the "meaning" approach has turned students away from poetry is that it does too much of the learning for them and thus leaves them nothing to enjoy.

The methods used in any teaching approach to poetry are based on its fundamental ideas about the nature of poetry. At the center of an approach is a particular view of what a poem is. That view directs and limits what we can find out about a poem because it determines the kinds of questions that can be asked about the poem. We learn to approach poetry through an established procedure believing that the answers we seek are the only answers possible. Thus, what we find in any given poem is no more than what our view of poetry allows us to find.

The "what-does-this-poem-mean" approach limits the poem to what is actually present on the printed page. It is based on the view that all of the poem worthy of consideration is contained in the words used in writing the poem and in the form in which the words are arranged. The "meaning" approach focuses on analyzing only what the words in the poem mean and how the words, symbols, and poetic devices relate to each other. The reader need not bring anything of himself or of the outside world to his study of the poem. The poem is set apart as a little world unto itself.

The "meaning" approach also limits the relationship between the poem and the world of actual experience. The miniature world of the poem is seen as only a reflection of the real world; it is a representation drawn from the real world but is not to be considered as a valid part of the world. Thus, the experience in the poem is created or imaginary and must be considered as nothing more than a picture of experience. Since the experience of the poem cannot be taken as a real experience, the primary concern of the approach is in considering the quality of the picture rather than in considering the picture in the context of the rest of the world.

By limiting the poem to the printed page and by denying the poem any direct contact with the outside world, the "meaning" approach isolates the poem as though it were on a microscope slide. The reader does not establish an active personal relationship with the poem because he can only consider it objectively. Since the words of the poem cannot lead outward to the world of experience, they have no place to turn but inward to the world of more words; the poem is forced back into itself like a caged animal.

Viewing poems as self contained systems makes the process of the "meaning" approach basically reductive. Since a poem cannot

be considered in relation to the rest of the world, it must be reduced through analysis and internal comparison to the smallest essential form of its communication. The words of the poem are studied to determine what other words they lead to; the aim of the process is to narrow the poem down into a statement, in the least number of words, of the "essence" of the poem. It is as though the only way the reader can understand the poem is to translate its words into other words that state its meaning. Thus, the "meaning" approach seems to imply that poems only have value when they have been defined by other words.

There seems to me to be something drastically wrong about a reductive approach to poetry. It implies that reading poems is much like cracking walnuts. The shell of a walnut is hard; as viewed by the "meaning" approach, the words and form of a poem are a shell that encases what a poem is saying. To get the meat from a walnut it is necessary to crack open the shell, and to find the meaning of a poem it is necessary to analyze or break the poem down. If this analogy is carried to its conclusion, the poem is of no more value than the pieces of a broken walnut shell and should be discarded when the reader has gotten the meaning from it. It is difficult to see how a reductive approach to poetry implies anything other than a basic distrust of the poem's ability to communicate for itself.

A reductive approach to poetry is especially wrong for use at the high school level. At a time when students should be exploring poems to find things they can like about them, they are taught to reduce them to prose. As a result, most students come away with a negative impression of poetry. They come to feel that the only thing poems are good for is tearing them down in class to find meanings that can be restated in prose. Most students quite sensibly begin to wonder why the ideas were not written in prose in the first place and why anyone bothers to write poems at all.

The "meaning" approach is a more sophisticated approach to poetry than most high school students have any reason for using. It is not intended to be used as a way to simply read, explore and enjoy poems but it is designed for use as a critical approach to poetry. Its reductive nature provides a systematic way for scholars and critics to judge the quality of writing in poems. The approach proceeds on the assumption that whoever uses it has a personal interest in judging the artistic merit of poems.

Considering the way poetry has been taught through the "meaning" approach, there is little reason to expect that many

students would have enough interest in it to want to critize it. The approach does not provide students with the opportunity to find out if they personally like poems. Rather, it assumes that they already have sufficent interest in poetry to want to critize it. Anyone who has ever taught high school English knows this is an unwarranted assumption.

In many ways the "meaning" approach itself makes it next to impossible for students to find something they like in poetry. A reductive approach to poetry not only lessens the value of individual poems but it also restricts the reader. The "meaning" approach allows for only an objective consideration of the poem and does not offer any way to express its subjective content. Such an impersonal approach to poetry places an unnecessary distance between the reader and the poem.

The "meaning" approach also prevents the students from ever finding out if they like poems because it approaches poetry through the back door. Students are taught to look at poems from the back by seeing the parts before they get to see the whole. Going at poems from this direction hinders most students' responses to poetry because they are kept so busy looking at the trees that they never get to see if the forest is beautiful.

Asking students to learn how a poem works before they have a chance to look at poems to see if they want to learn how to study poetry is the most unreasonable expectation of the "meaning" approach. For instance, no one would claim that all drivers need to be mechanics before they can drive their cars. It is probably true that everybody would be better drivers if they were also mechanics, but it is not true that all drivers need to be mechanics to use and appreciate their cars. The people who do become mechanics are people who like driving so much that they want to know how cars work and how to tell a good car from a bad one. The "meaning" approach does not give students a chance to learn how to "drive" before demanding that they become "mechanics."

I stated earlier that we find in poems only what our view of poetry allows us to find. If we are looking for reasons why students dislike poetry, the answer may be simply that we have not allowed them to see enough of what is in any poem or allowed them to close enough to any poem to like poetry. If students are not interested in poetry, one of the main reasons must be that the "meaning" approach does not allow them to see poems in a way that answers their needs.

I said at the end of an earlier section that from talking with students in the classroom I developed a pretty good understanding of why students dislike poetry. I went on from there to point out that the "meaning" approach was creating the problem and to discuss how the approach made it difficult for students to ever like poetry. But I never did say exactly what it was that I learned from those students. I think perhaps I should try to state it now.

I realized in talking to the students that as far as they were concerned we have been approaching poetry in the classroom in exactly the wrong direction. We have presented poetry as something the students had to take as we taught it and make fit into their lives regardless of how bad the fit seemed to them. I think we should have been bringing poems to the students, rather than making the students come to the poems, if we want them to like poetry. We have been teaching poetry for poetry's sake rather than for the sake of our students.

I am going to suggest a radical change in the attitude we as teachers have about teaching poetry. If we do in fact feel that something has to be done to make the classroom experience with poetry more rewarding, then we are going to have to change our attitudes to make other changes possible. And the basic change I think we need to make is one of getting our priorities straight in terms of why we are teaching poetry. We have got to make a complete turn about and recognize that the only good reason for teaching poetry is the needs of the students and not the needs of the subject material.

In the next chapter I am going to discuss the things I believe such an attitude change will make possible. For now it is enough to say that I think looking at teaching poetry from the view of our students' needs will answer many of the questions about how we should be teaching poetry. A world of new possibilities should open up in the classroom when we begin to think of how poetry fits our students' needs. And most promising of all, our students might well find a reason to like poetry when we stop thinking we have to force it on them.

CHAPTER TWO

(the new way)

1

If anything has been established thus far, it is that teaching poetry is generally a chore. It is hard and usually unrewarding work for teachers and too often a meaningless task for students. Most classes respond to poetry like they would respond to extra days of school. I am surprised that poetry has survived as long as it has in English classes.

Why do we then continue to make the effort of teaching poetry? It does not seem explanation enough to say that we keep trying because the students need to know about poetry, since their responses tell us how little they feel they need to know about the subject. Yet, we evidently have the hope that something will be gained by forcing ourselves and our students through such punishment.

I think we are working on faith -- a faith that grows out of the times we've spent alone re-reading our favorite poems. We know poetry can be interesting, exciting, and, often, extremely moving; we know because we have experienced all of this. We have experienced this because poetry is ultimately much more than a lot of parts that need to be identified and a collection of words that can, with a lot of hard work, be pinned down to an exact meaning.

We read poetry not because it is difficult, but because it has in it more information about the essentials of being human than any other form of expression. Poems are our most direct attempts to deal with those aspects of our existence that are vital to the human spirit. We read them, ultimately, for their spiritual communication -- a communication in which we hope to find out more about ourselves through the sounding board of their

experiences.

What better reason that than do we need for teaching poetry? But if poems do have such a value, then why it is having such a hard time making itself known to our students? I think the answer is that we have not done enough to help it come through. We have done everything with poems except expose our students to source of their value — the human, spiritual communication in them.

If we want our students to find the value in poetry we are going to have to show them how to come to poems as human beings, not critics. When students learn that they can approach poems with their own needs and their own feelings, just as we do when we sit down to re-read our favorite poems, I think they will understand why we have been trying to give them poetry for so long. And more importantly, I think they will be able to understand poems.

2

Since most high school students think there is nothing more to poetry than useless school work, helping them change that attitude is not going to be easy. Their experience with poems has forced them into a pattern of negative responses which shuts out other possibilities. They do not want what they have seen of poetry, and it will be hard to convince them that they can find something of value by looking further.

Given that situation, how can we entice students into taking another look at poems? Simply telling them that they can find personal spiritual communication in poems will not be enough. Telling them that there are other ways of looking at poems will not help either. I think that unless we start by giving students back a sense of worth as readers, our efforts will fail to interest them.

After years of feeling that they are not smart enough to read poems, students need to be told that as human beings they are fully qualified to be readers. They need to know that their ideas and feelings are completely legitimate responses and are vital to the process of poetry. When we can convince students that poems belong to them as much as to any teacher or critic, we will have our foot in the door toward giving them a reason for poetry.

But getting students to let poetry in the house is only the

beginning: we also need to let them know what they can do when in the room with a poem. We can help them feel more at ease around poetry by letting them know it is okay to approach a poem and try to make friends. We have got to cut down the distance between the reader and the poem, or it will not be possible for students to experience the spiritual communication in poetry.

Poetry is not a high and sacred art form that can only be viewed from a respectful distance. Even Shakespeare knew he was writing for the people in his audiences and not for scholars and critics. As long as we let our students continue thinking that poetry is something which belongs in a world removed from theirs, they are not going to have the desire to read poems for themselves. We have got to make poems available to students by giving them a new view of poetry.

We need to let students in on the fact that poetry is only a form of human communication. It is one way in which men try to share their views of the world with others, and the only way there can be communication is for the reader to try out those views in the world he sees. Since poetry depends on human response for its life, it is time we as teachers began helping students work with that response and concerned ourselves less with teaching them about "art."

Communication implies interaction, and students must be allowed to interact with poems. Only then is the spiritual communication possible. The poem is not complete until the reader has translated its words, not into other words, but into the world of his own experience. It takes the human touch of a reader to bring poems to life – the poem lives in the reader or not at all.

There in lies the importance of the reader to poetry. A closed view of poetry maintains that the poem is complete without the reader, but that simply is not so. A tree falling in the woods does not make a sound without an ear to hear it, and likewise, a poem does not communicate unless its words reverberate against the human spirit of a reader. Poetry is the interaction between poem and reader, and it is like the human spirit - alive, energetic and fluid. Poems are not just static black letters on a white page.

An open view of poetry implies that poems are not statements, but possibilities for interaction and thus for communication. I think students should be open to such a view; they are tired of being forced into a position where they have to listen to someone else's ideas. They have feelings and ideas of their own that they

want to bring to the reading of poems, and an open view lets them know that they can take part.

Students can be more open to poems when we can show them that poems are open to them. Letting students know they share in the process of poetry by completing poems with their responses does this. I think students will feel they can do something worth their time with poems when they realize they can take poems out of the world of abstract ideas on the printed page and put them into their own human context.

3

Giving our students a new view of poems and of themselves as readers is a good beginning toward helping them find the value of poetry. But we cannot stop there because a new view alone is not enough.

While the new view makes rewarding contact between students and poems possible, it does not insure that the students will be successful with the poems they read in the classroom. Only when we can also offer our students a way of discovering the spiritual value of their reading will we be on the road to helping them realize the potential in their interaction with poems. Our problem, therefore, is to find a new and more meaningful approach to working with poems in the classroom.

If this new approach is going to help the student recognize the spiritual communication of a poem, then it must first help him get his knowledge of the poem out in the open where he can deal with it. It is obvious that the approach will have to provide a way for the individual student to expand on his reading by reporting back on it. And the most practical means to that end is the simplest — have the students discuss the poems they have read with the class.

But random discussion by itself is not a reliable way to get a student to express his awareness of a poem's spiritual communication. Since this approach wants to help the student recognize in particular the spiritual value of the poems he reads, it must have a focus of discussion that will help him move in that direction. Such a focus will not be easy to come by, however, because it must satisfy two requirements to fulfill its purpose.

First, this focus must allow the student to discuss his knowledge of a poem in a context that will maintain the personal

involvement he had when he read the poem. And second, it must bring out the information about the poem that will make the poem's spiritual communication available to the student.

I think we can best serve the aims of our approach by taking these needs one at a time. Since the foremost concern of the approach is that it work for the student, it seems logical to begin by trying to find a focus that will make a discussion a matter of personal concern for him. And as we already know that the critical approach's emphasis on artistic quality is not what we need, I suggest that we go back to the classroom to look for a more rewarding possibility.

In any classroom situation involving poetry there are three basic elements: the student, who, as I have already established, is not greatly interested in talking about other people's ideas; the teacher, who comes to the classroom with her preconceived ideas about the poems she teaches; and those groups of words we call "poems." For the purpose of a discussion of poetry that would interest and involve students, which of the above seem the best starting point?

The situation presents its own answer. Obviously, the first element, as defined, knocks out any consideration of the second as a starting point. And since students are not likely to be any more interested in talking about words on paper than they are other people's ideas, the third alternative is also eliminated. Thus, for better or worse, we must go back to the first element and begin to look at the student himself, and his experience, as the best starting point for a productive classroom discussion of poetry.

Let me emphasize my point with an analogy. Say we are teaching a course in air conditioners, and our objective is that we want the students to be aware of the benefits of those machines. We certainly would not expect the students to know the value of being cooled by taking the machine apart and studying its parts. Neither would we expect them to be aware of the benefit of the air conditioner by being told what it means to be cooled. We would turn the air conditioner on and let the students stand in front of it, and then we would ask them if they felt anything.

I suggest that students are like everyone else in that they want to approach things from the point of view of how it relates to them. We have been looking for a way to involve students in discussions about poems. What better way could there be to lead them into talking than to start with something they know personally and are likely to be interested in -- their own

experiences with, and reactions to, the poems they read?

Back to the air conditioner -- if we wanted to know if a student had received any of the benefit of the air conditioner, we would not ask him to talk about the machine; we would ask him to talk about himself and his experience. Something happened to the student in front of the air conditioner that he can talk about because it is his own experience. Something happens to a person who reads a poem too, and he is equally qualified to talk of his knowledge of the poem through that experience.

But can the student become aware of the siritual communication of a poem through a discussion that focuses on his experience as its reader?

I think the answer to that question is clearly indicated by the view of poems on which this new approach is based. The spiritual benefit of a poem is in what the student experienced when he read the poem because communication took place in that interaction. Thus, the student's experience of a poem is well worth discussing as a source of information about the poem's communication.

The things that happened to the student as he read the poem were not accidental. The poem brought the reader the opportunity to personally experience the view that its words represent. And because the reader is an alive and sensitive human being, he was more than just passively aware; he responded to what was offered him. Through that interaction, the poem and the reader created the experience that the reader lived out for that moment of his life.

The thoughts, feelings and sensations that make up the student's experience when he reads a poem are the poem's communication. They must be discussed because the poem invites those human responses as spiritual information about the particular view it is trying to communicate. If the poem needs the reader's response to communicate, then it follows that the reader needs to know about his own expgrience to be aware of the communication he has received.

Using the reader's experience of a poem as the focus of discussion in a new classroom approach to poetry fulfills the promise we made our students when we gave them a new view of poems. The students can not help but be involved in the spiritual communications of poems through such discussion because they will be talking about how the poems affected them as human spirits. And how could we offer our students better access to the value of poetry than an approach that uses the part of their lives

that they devote to reading poems as the key to awareness and understanding.

4

As teachers and as readers ourselves, we assume that every poem is trying to communicate something. But at the same time, we recognize, because of our own frustrations with the limitations of language, that receiving communication and understanding it do not necessarily occur as one process. Thus, we realize that our students are not only going to need the opportunity to discuss their experiences with poems but that they are also going to need some kind of method for exploring the communication in those experiences.

To help students with their explorations of poems, I am suggesting a classroom approach to discussion that I call "expanding poems." The "meaning" approach tries to understand the communication of poetry by isolating it and removing it from the poem. But an approach that has to reduce poems to understand them does so at the cost of losing touch with both poem and reader and thus the process of communication. Instead, I think we should offer our students a method of recognizing poetic communication that uses the reader's experience as the focal point for expanding his awareness of all that took place in his interaction with a poem.

While I call the approach, "expanding poems," it is actually not the poems themselves that are expanded through the student's exploration. In a sense, any poem that a student has read is already expanded because through interaciton it has become part of the student's life and the student's responses have become part of its information. Rather it is the student who needs to expand his awareness of the poem because even though he took part in the process of the poem's communication that communication is not going to suddenly appear to him like a message in magic ink that is held up to a light.

The method I suggest is simply a process of progressive exploration whereby the student can bring the information he has received about a poem's communication to the conscious level. The student starts with the most readily available information he

has about his experience with a poem - his feelings - and develops his awareness to where he can recognize how the words of the poem influenced his interaction with the poem. By using the method in classroom discussion, the student should be able to follow his responses back through his interaction with a poem and thus expand his awareness of how his experience with the poem represents the view the poem is trying to communicate.

I could go on to say why I believe this method offers students a way to lift poems from the page and thereby expand them beyond the limitations of language, but I feel we have reached the point where such discussion cannot give us any further insight into the workings of the approach. Therefore, I want to move to description and try to give you a more concrete explanation of how "expanding poems" can look and sound in action. I am going to sketch out the basic form the approach takes when I use it in the classroom. To also give you a perspective on how the outline illustrates the approach, I want to preface the outline with three points of explanation.

First, the sketch I am going to give is not the step-by-step of an exact equation for studying poems, but simply a working example of the unrestrictive and unprogramed approach to poems which we have been discussing. I am not offering the particulars of my teaching procedure to suggest that they themselves should be adopted verbatim as the only successful way to approach poems. I only want to show that the student-centered attitude about teaching poetry can work naturally and productively in the classroom.

I also want to point out that this outline is a series of questions and not a list of instructions. The questions are intended to help students discover poems for themselves and on their own terms and not to lead them by the hand through the correct material. There can be nothing but questions in this approach because its aim is exploration and not some preconceived conclusion. By showing that my method is to ask and not to tell, I want to emphasize that what happens in this approach to poems must take place in the students.

And thirdly, I want to explain that the outline I am giving is not important for itself but for the direction its questions represent. The approach I am suggesting is cumulative and develops in three basic progressions. It begins with what is closest to the student, his own experience with a poem, helps him move outward to expand his awareness to include the language of the poem that is

communicating to him, and then hopefully brings him, by means of his own exploration, to a point of consciousness that was not previously a part of his experience. This outline is meaningless unless it is seen as merely an illustration of my suggestion that the only way poems should be approached in the classroom is with the individual student as the point of reference.

Now we come to the outline itself. Throughout this outline I am going to speak in terms of a single student. I will do so even though the approach is designed for use with a whole class because the success of the approach in the classroom depends on what happens with the individual student.

Expanding Poems

I hand the student a poem and have him read it at least twice. I read it aloud also. The first thing I try to help the student do after he has read a poem is stop long enough to notice his own response to the poem. I want him to begin his exploration of the poem by recognizing his own involvement with the poem. To that end I ask the following question.

1. How did you feel after you read the poem?

This first question can take a number of different forms, such as: How do you feel about the poem? What effect did the poem have on you? What is your first impression of the poem? or simply, Did the poem make you feel anything? The important thing about the opening question is that it should help the student recognize that he is in contact with the poem through his feelings.

The second question continues the focus on helping the student explore his experience with the poem. It is the logical expansion of the student's awareness from the first question. The student felt something when he read the poem, and it follows that understanding his experience with the poem would include asking why he felt what he did. This is the question I usually use to help the student get at the source of his feelings.

2. What was going on in the poem that made you respond as you did?

The purpose of this question is to explore the poem as a human

event. Feelings do not just appear by themselves; they come with human situations. The student will know more about his experience with a poem when he recognizes the situation in which his feelings occurred. The poem is part of his life because he did not just interact with words but with the people, places and things which the words represent.

To help the student discover what happened to him with the poem, I suggest that he continue exploring the second question by describing the things that make up the situation of the poem. The simplest way to lay out the poem as a situation is to find the standard elements — setting, characters, and story. With this awareness of what was going on in the expanded poem, the student should be able to see the spiritual event that brought about his response.

The first two questions open the way for a different kind of exploration in the third question. While the human situation of a poem is not peopled by words, it is created for the reader by words. When the student has looked at the poem as a whole experience, he then has reason for sharpening his awareness of the poem by looking at the parts that make up the whole. He is ready to explore how the words and poetic devices — the language of the poem — worked together to create the poem he experienced.

The third question is intended to help the student explore the unity of language that made up the effect of the poem. The poem affected the student as one experience because he responded to its words and poetic devices which were working together to create a single total effect. By looking at those smaller effects individually and in terms of how they relate to one another, the student should have a better understanding of what the poem was trying to communicate to him through his experience with it.

I use a question similiar to the following to help the student explore the parts of a poem and then put it back together:

3. What were the important things in the language of the poem that influenced the feeling you got from the poem?

I do not give the student a list of poetic devices and ask him to find them in the poem. I want him to explore the language of the poem from the point of view of his feeling about the poem. The purpose of this question is to help the student recognize the words and poetic devices he responded to as part of his total response to the poem. By keeping his feelings as the guide to his exploration

the student can look at the parts of the poem without taking it apart.

In the third question I do not assume that the student has a specialized knowledge of poetic devices. I have, however, tried to introduce him to five techniques of poetic language that are used for their effectiveness. As I introduce the student to the approach of expanding poems I will often suggest that he notice how the following can influence his experience:

tone—the tone of voice of the speaker or the mood of the situation

image—the descriptive language used in picturing setting and characterization

association—words that are used because of the feelings we connect with them

metaphor—the use of comparison for description or characterization (including simile and personification)

sound devices—words or word combinations that are used because their sounds convey a particular impression

All I want the student to be aware of in exploring poetic language is that words not only denote meanings but can also connote an impression and that their dual nature is important to the effect of a poem on the reader.

The fourth question is probably the most open-ended of all these questions. As a teacher I have done all I can do to help the student get the information he needs to have to have an understanding of the poem. From this point on what the student does with his awareness of the experience he has had with the poem is a matter of his individual needs and interests.

In this last development of the exploration of a poem all I can do is try to give the student the opportunity to express what he feels he has derived from the poem. To give the student an opening for expressing the poem's significance to him, I use the following general question as a starter:

4. What do you make of all you've found and felt in this poem?

As I said, the fourth question is very broad. I usually follow it with other questions of more specific nature to help the student approach his information from different angles:

What kind of experience do you think this poem represents?

What do you think is the poet's view of this experience?

How is the experience of this poem significant to you?

Has this poem helped you see anything you can talk about?

There are an endless number of questions that could be used here, but the best are the ones the student poses himself.

This outline cannot do any more than give a general indication of the nature of expanding poems. It is just the bones of the approach without the meat of actual use to bring it to life. In the next four chapters I am going to try to show how I would fill in this framework with students and poems in a classroom situation.

5

Before I leave this chapter, I want to offer you one more thing. I have expended a great many words in my effort to talk about an attitude I think is vital to reading or teaching poems. Behind all these words I have been trying to communicate my belief that poetry cannot be alive in the classroom unless it is approached as a living, breathing, active thing. The poem is a part of the student's life or it has no life.

Prose sometimes disappoints me because it is hard to say a thing logically and still say it with strong feeling. Since I am trying to communicate an attitude in this book, you might take it as a lack of faith in my own prose if I were to bring in a poem I think communicates everything I have been trying to express. I offer this poem by William Matthews anyway.

The Search Party

I wondered if the others felt

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Ruining the New Road

CHAPTER THREE

(the first class)

1

The approach to poems I have been trying to discuss and describe is more than just a theory or an attitude. I believe that "expanding" poems is a good way to approach teaching poetry because I have seen it work in the classroom. And thus, I think there is no better way to show you why I am suggesting this approach than to take it back to the classroom where it belongs.

I am going to devote the next four chapters to four days of classroom work with poetry. Each day I will try to show how I introduce and then work with one of the four stages of development in the approach. You can help me in this demonstration by coming to the class sessions as a student. If this learning experience is successful, then you will hopefully be able to see more than I could ever say about expanding poems.

The first day of class will be built around the first question of the outline in Chapter Two. I am going to spend a whole class meeting on that single question, "How did you feel after you read the poem?" because it is in that question that the approach either wins or loses with both student and poem. The student cannot expand a poem he does not know how to get in touch with.

This approach depends on something more basic than the student's discovery of poetry and that is his discovery of his own feelings. In expanding poems the student works with the information in those feelings as much as he does with any poem. Thus we are going to start this unit by trying to help the student learn to listen to what his feelings have to tell him. Of course we are going to listen to some poems too.

The First Day

Before we jump into some poems, I think we should take a look at writing in general. Let us start by assuming that anything we write for other people we write because we want to communicate. There are a number of different kinds of writing, and it might help us to first try to decide some of the things we expect from the different kinds of writing.

We write letters and notes mainly to communicate information. We write stories and narratives to describe situations and events. And we write papers, not just because the teacher tells us to, but because in order to get a good grade we have to express our ideas and show we've learned something.

What are we trying to communicate or express when we write poems?

Poems do more than just convey information, tell stories or express ideas. They must or we would have no reason for reading them. We've got perfectly good ways of communicating those things, and it would not seem sensible to try to use poems to do something that we can already do better in another way.

Then what part of our lives do we expect to find expressed when we read poems?

We read poems mainly because they express how we feel. There can be information, stories and ideas in poems, but the first thing we expect to find when we read a poem is some kind of feeling. And we continue reading poems because we are looking for expressions of feelings that we recognize as our own.

How do poems express feelings?

That's a hard question. Maybe we should first discuss the business of talking about our feelings in general. Let's say something important happens in your life – you fall in or out of love; your grandmother gets run over by a truck; or your father tells you not to leave the house at night for six weeks – and you want to tell your best friend about your feelings. So you sit down and try to communicate to him exactly what is going on inside you.

Do you find it easy to talk about your feelings and get other people to understand them?

Most people don't, and they give a lot of different reasons why it's so hard for them to communicate their feelings. Some say there aren't enough words; others say that they just can't find the right words, and a few paranoids contend that it's because no one understands them.

Let's look at the situation of you trying to tell your friend how you feel and see if we can find out what goes wrong. There are three characters in this little play: you, your friend, and the language you both are speaking. One of these three is not holding up its end.

Do you go away with the sense that you were unable to make your friend understand how you feel because you are a defective person and don't have the right part for talking about feelings, or because your friend is dumb and can't understand much of anything, or perhaps because the language won't work like you want?

Nobody is going to admit that he is a defective person. And if your friend is that dumb then you probably should get another one. Thus, the problem must be the language. Let's look at the nature of language to see if we can find out why your feelings don't always seem to fit into words.

Language is a funny thing. Everybody has one he uses, and thus we all tend to start thinking that it belongs to us alone. But it doesn't; a language belongs to everybody who uses it. If all the people in a country or a culture are going to use the same language, then they are all going to to have to have some general idea of what its words mean. And if a language is going to be general enough for everybody to use, it can't always be specific enough to fit our individual needs.

To talk to other people in a language, you have to give up some exactness in talking about your ideas and feelings so they'll be able to have some understanding of what you are saying. The only way to get around the generality of language is to have a language all your own. Then nobody could talk to you unless they cared enough about you to learn your language.

So as human beings we learn that we are going to have trouble talking about our feelings and that we will have to look for other

means of expression to get around the inability of language to describe our feelings exactly in ordinary speech. The best way we've found to transcend that problem seems to be poetry. So now we are back to an earlier question and it's gotten even harder . . .

If you can't say how you feel, how can you express your feeling in a poem?

A poem is made up of words, and we already know that words won't do exactly what we want them to do. So poems must have some advantage over individual words. Another way of putting the question above would be to ask, "How can you communicate something you can't say?" Or in the case of our feelings, we could ask:

How can you let somebody know how you're feeling when you can't tell them how you're feeling?

We usually don't try to say directly how we are feeling; we come at our friend from another angle. We try to let people know how we're feeling by making them feel, as closely as possible, the same thing. Rather than just saying, "I feel like this," we describe what happened to us so they'll understand what caused our feeling and, if they put themselves in our place, probably feel much the same as we did.

And that's how poems express our feelings They don't say the feeling directly; they re-create the situation of the feeling and let the reader have the experience of the feeling himself.

A German writer named Burkhardt said, "If language were perfect, there would be no reason for poetry." That is a good explanation of what poetry does. It takes up the slack left by the language. Poetry gives us a way of expressing our feelings that is better than just words by themselves.

Now let's talk about reading poems, and remember we have established that a poem is intended to make you feel something. Someone hands you a poem and you read it over a couple of times

What's the first thing you should ask yourself after you've read a poem?

I know you've been asking yourself, "What does this poem mean," but have you forgotten that a poem communicates by making you feel something? Maybe we aren't stopping long enough to to listen to the poem. Let's see if this will help. The first thing we do after we read a poem is get quiet with ourselves and ask, "How does this poem make me feel?"

At the very first don't worry about what the poem is saying in words; worry about hearing what the poem has communicated through your feelings. When you first meet a person, you don't know them well enough to say exactly who they are, but even from first exposure you have an impression about them. And you start with that impression and try to get to know more about the person.

Poems create impressions on you too. That means that after first contact with a poem, you not only have to read the poem; you have to read yourself too. Listening to how you feel is the only way you can find out what kind of impression the poem made on you.

But reading your own feelings is possibly the hardest part of reading poems. We aren't in the habit of noticing how we feel. We are constantly responding to the things that happen in our lives, but we seldom stop long enough to notice how we responded. So when somebody asks us what we feel, we have to make a special effort to find out because we haven't been paying attention.

When you first start trying to notice your feelings after you've read a poem, don't expect to find exact words for them. If there were exact words for what a poem makes you feel, the poet would have used them in the first place. The best you can hope for at first is to get an indication of the direction of your feelings and maybe some idea of how strong they are.

To help you get started noticing, I suggest a little gadget I invented. Let's say you've got a meter in the middle of your chest. The right side of the meter says up and the left side says down. And there's a needle in the middle that points to the top of the dial. Everything that comes along in your life makes you feel something and everything you feel makes that needle move. Sometimes, the needle moves a lot and other times it barely jiggles. But everything that happens to you makes the needle go in one direction or another.

Everytime you read a poem, you can check that meter to see which way the needle moved and how far. The poem could make you feel up or down, good or bad, happy or sad. The important

thing is to get some idea of what the poem made you feel because when you find out the direction of your feelings you then have a better understanding of the kind of impression the poem made on you.

If you want to know even more about how the poem made you feel, you can read it again and try to find words of your own to describe your feelings. You usually won't be able to pin what you feel down to an exact word, but the effort of trying to describe your feelings gets you closer to the poem and yourself. And the only way to find out what a poem is trying to communicate is to get in there and take part in what is happening.

What do you think is the hardest part about reading poems?

I think most people would say, "Understanding them." I also think the reason that most people feel like they have trouble understanding poems is that they don't try to find out how they feel about a poem before they try to understand it. You don't have to completely understand a poem to get a feeling from it, but you do have to recognize your own feelings before you can really understand a poem.

When something happens to you in your life, you respond to it immediately, and your first response is usually a feeling. You may not understand what happened, but you have a feeling about it, and you often use that feeling as a guide to how you react. A full understanding of what happened is usually the last thing you get. I suggest that reading poems works in the same way.

I am going to give you two poems to read, and I would like for you to read them twice. You probably won't understand fully what is going on in either one after two readings, and I don't want you to try yet. Concentrate on noticing how the poems make you feel. The first is by Lennart Bruce and the second is by William Carlos Williams.

Moments of doubt

in front of the toothpaste tube
of my dead father

I still remember
my hesitation

what to do with it,
practically full?

from Tennessee Poetry Journal

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Selected Poems

Did you get a feeling from the two poems?

Perhaps that's not a fair question. Let's compare the two poems and see if they made you feel the same.

Which of the poems made you feel better?

To restate the question in terms of that meter in your chest, you could ask yourself if one of the poems made you feel up and one made you feel down. "Moments of Doubt" probably did not make you feel very up. Let's go further with the poem and see if we can find out what about it made you feel down.

Is there anything going on in the poem "Moments of Doubt" that would tend to make you feel down?

A man is standing in front of the mirror brushing his teeth. He picks up the tube of toothpaste and realizes that this toothpaste belonged to his father who died, probably recently. He can't decide whether or not to use the toothpaste.

Why do you think the man hesitated about using the toothpaste?

The toothpaste belonged to his father who is dead. The man may have felt that if he used the toothpaste up that would be one more thing that belonged to his father which he would no longer have. After people we love die, we often keep things they owned around as remembrances.

Can you find a word to describe your down feeling about what is going on in this poem?

A tube of toothpaste doesn't seem like a very important memento, so you probably didn't feel anguish. However, that toothpaste is connected with the loss of loved one, and so you must have felt some sadness over the death. Since a tube of toothpaste is only a tube of toothpaste, the uncertainty or confusion you felt was probably only momentary. Then you went on about your business.

Would you have used the tube of toothpaste?

Your response to "This Is Just to Say" was probably quite different from your response to the toothpaste poem. I doubt if the plum poem made you feel sadness and grief like the first one did. In fact, I would imagine you felt up and postive after reading "This Is Just to Say." Let's look at the poem to see if we can find out why a poem which doesn't seem to be about a very lifting subject can make you feel lifted.

What is going on in this poem that you would be likely to have a strong response to?

A man found some plums in the refrigerator and he wanted to eat them. He knew, however, that the plums belonged to someone else who was saving them to eat themselves. The man ate the plums anyway. So far there doesn't seem to anything very happy about this poem.

Can you see anything about what is happening in the poem that would make you feel little?

After the man ate the plums, he left a note saying that he was sorry. He cared enough about the person to whom the plums belonged to tell them what he had done and apologize for it. That doesn't seem like much until you realize that he could have, as many people would have done, either tried to hide what he had done or just run off without saying anything. Read the last four lines of the poem aloud and see if they are the part of the poem that makes everything seem okay.

If you were the person who owned the plums, would you be angry at the man or would you forgive him?

The person who owned the plums probably also cared very much for the man who ate them. This person, possibly his wife, would know, because he left the note, that he did not eat the plums to be mean to her. Most likely she would smile at his weakness and forgive him; she might even be pleased because he enjoyed the plums.

The impression a poem creates for the reader is an important part of its character. That impression can lead you to get to know the poem better. "Moments of Doubt" leaves a sad impression and "This Is Just to Say" gives you a happier one. From that basic information about the poems you could tell they were moving in different directions before you knew exactly what their words were saying.

Let's look at another poem. After you have read this poem twice, do not look back at it until you have looked inside yourself for some indication of what is going on. Listen to your own feelings and you will find the beginnings of the poem's communication. This poem is by James Wright.

I Try to Waken and Greet the World Once Again

In a pine tree

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Collected Poems

Did Wright's poem make you feel up or down?

The poem leaves you with a positive feeling. You might not want to say that the poem makes you happy, but you certainly do not feel worse than you did before reading it. Something in the poem creates an impression of strength and security. Go back and read just the title of the poem.

Does the title seem positive?

"I Try to Waken and Greet the World Once Again" is not a very lifting statement. If you have to make an effort to face the world, then you must not feel very good about doing it. But in spite of the title, you come away from the poem feeling lifted.

After the rather down statement in the title, what happens in the poem that would cause your feelings to rise?

Let's say you're the man in the poem. You've just gotten up and you're trying to get yourself together enough to go out into the world and do something you are not looking forward to doing. You walk past the window and see a blue jay jumping up and down on a branch. You laugh.

What is it about that blue jay that caused your feelings to change from despression to laughter?

Are you some kind of nut who really gets excited about birds and seeing the blue jay turns you on?" Unless you're a bird watcher and blue jay is very rare, it doesn't seem likely that just seeing the bird would make your day.

Is the blue jay doing something that makes you feel better?

That bird is out there on that branch jumping up and down like he doesn't know the world is a place full of troubles. He's got a

branch he likes; he's jumping on it, and he's clearly enjoying himself.

By freely jumping up and down on the branch, what does the blue jay show that he knows about his branch that the man has forgotten about his world?

Things that happen in the world influence our feelings. Poems are like all the other parts of our world. When we jump right in after we read a poem and ask "what does this poem mean," we are forgetting that poems, just like that blue jay, cause things to happen inside us. The feelings we get from reading a poem are the best way we have of knowing that something has happened to us that we want to know more about.

In looking at the last poem I asked you to do something that put you right up against any feelings that the poem was trying to communicate. I suggested that you put yourself in the poem. It would certainly seem that the best way to find out what is going on in a poem would be to get in there in the middle of it.

We are going to look at one more poem today, and I am again going to ask you to let yourself become the "I" in the poem. The first time you read the poem, just read to see what is there. The second time around, say, "This is happening to me." Then you can report back on what you feel from direct experience.

This is one of William Stafford's best known poems.

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Traveling through the Dark

This time let's concentrate on finding out everything we can about your feelings for this poem. I want us to follow them as far as we can before we say anything about the poem itself.

Did you have any trouble telling which way the needle on that meter in your chest went with this poem?

I imagine the needle went pretty far down. You may be feeling somewhat upset and disturbed. I think it is important for us to pin down as closely as we can the kind of discomfort you are feeling.

Run different words through your mind to see which one comes the closest to describing your feelings.

The feeling I have after reading "Traveling through the Dark" is definitely one of sadness. But, it's not grief like I would feel over the death of a friend. Maybe saying that I am really bothered by what happens in the poem comes closer to describing my feeling. I think I'm bothered because there doesn't appear to be any way to avoid what happens. I want to do something to change the situation and know I can't; so maybe I am also feeling helpless. It doesn't help to realize that what happened had to be. I am in conflict because I want to go two ways at once. Perhaps my feelings can best be described as frustration.

Can you think of any way to avoid what happens at the end of the poem?

I would suggest that you read this poem again. We aren't going to try to do anything more with in this class meeting. It is a complex poem and I think we need to look at ways of talking

about events and situations in poems before we try to decide why this poem made us feel as we did.

I want to end our discussion of using our feelings as a way to understand poems with this general thought. I think that too often we tend to see poems as somebody else's feelings. We read poems to find expressions of our own feelings but usually we don't let ourselves get close enough to a poem to see if its feeling could be ours.

I think the only way to find out if we do recognize the feeling in a poem is to get in there and try it out. And the best way to try on the feeling of a poem is to participate in the poem. Poetry doesn't just communicate by telling you something, it communicates by offering you an experience and asking you to take part.

Perhaps my suggestion will make more sense if you try it out yourself. I offer the following two poems for your personal reading. They are for you to look at on your own.

The first is a longer poem by James Wright.

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's
Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTION

from The Collected Poems

Remember that these poems cannot communicate to you if you refuse to take part in what they offer. You can't expect to be able to stand back from a poem and get much from it. You have to meet a poem half way.

Try doing just that with this poem by David Ignatow.

The Life Dance

I see bubbling out of the ground

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Rescue the Dead

CHAPTER FOUR

(the second class)

1

In this second class meeting I want to show the student how to find his way into the forest of the expanded poem. Our first class session brought the student to the edge of the forest where he stood outside the poem looking at it and trying to decide how he felt about it. When he has learned how to use his feelings to find out what kind of forest he is looking at, I think the student is ready to enter poems and explore them from the inside.

Once the student is able to locate and identify his feelings about poems, he needs to know how to use that information to further understand poems. For our work in this class, I will use the second question from the outline in Chapter Two to show the student how to follow his feelings back to their sources in poems. I want the student to learn to use his feelings about a poem as a guide for determining what happened in his experience with the expanded poem.

The purpose of this second class is not just to show the student how to get inside an expanded poem. I also want the student to recognize from his work with the second question that when he discusses the situation of a poem he is not just talking about a group of words; he is exploring a human event in which he plays a part. I think it is essential to the student's understanding of a poem that he be reminded that he must have believed in the reality of what was taking place in the poem or he would not have responded to it with his feelings.

The Second Day

I want to continue showing you how you can use yourself - the reader - as a source of information about poems. We have looked at the way your own feelings about a poem can tell you much about its communication. I want to take these feelings one step closer to the poem and show you that you can also increase your understanding of a poem by recognizing where your feelings came from.

Let's start by saying that since poems are communication about human life, we are going to continue looking at them as we would anything else that happens in our lives. As we said earlier, when something happens to you, you have that first impression or feeling about it. The next step is a question of what you do with that feeling. If it is important to you, you will want to know more; you will want to know why you felt as you did. And for that information, you will have to look to the event that caused your response.

Do you remember what we said last time about how poems communicate feelings?

Poems don't tell you what you are feeling; so there is no reason to expect that they will tell you why you're feeling what you're feeling. Poems communicate feelings by putting you in the situation of the feelings. So if you want to know why you have a feeling about a poem, it would seem logical to figure out what its situation is.

How would you go about figuring out the situation of a poem?

I'm sure that at first it seems like it would be hard to find the situation in a poem. A poem is nothing but words, and words can't have a situation other than just being there on a sheet of paper. But you have to remember that words are more than just black marks on a white page. Words represent things that we know in our world. If you put together the things that the words of a poem represent, then you have a real human situation. So you have to find the people, places and things in a poem to know what the event is in the poem that you are responding to.

I want to give you a quote from Robert Frost that I think is a good guide for figuring out the situation in a poem. By bringing

out a quality of poems that we don't usually think of, the quote should give you a way to lay out the situation of a poem where you can see it. Frost said, "A poem is as good as it is dramatic."

Why do you think Frost would say that a poem needs to be dramatic to be good?

First we should look at how Frost is using the word "dramatic." I don't think Frost is saying that a poem should be loud and showy like a person who is making an exaggerated display of his feelings. Frost seems to be using the word in the sense of having to do with drama. And a drama is a play. Let's try rephrasing the quote like this - a poem is as good as it is like a play.

Why would Frost want a poem to be like a play?

Plays are the acting out of human situations. I don't think Frost means that a poem should be a play, but rather that it ought to have some of the qualities of a play. Frost knew that poems had to be more than just statements. He knew that for the feeling in a poem to be believable it had to come in some kind of human context - in a little play.

Can you see how looking at poems as little plays would help you understand where your feelings came from?

Plays have three basic elements: setting, characters and story. Finding those three elements in a poem should give you a pretty good indication of the situation in which your feelings arose. When you lay out the situation of a poem in a play that you can recognize, you've got the experience of the poem up off the paper and into your own human context where you can deal with it.

Poems are short and usually don't come with pictures. How can you find character, setting and story in a poem if the poem doesn't tell you exactly what they are?

That question brings up an important point about poems. Just as poems don't tell you feelings directly, they usually don't tell you their situations directly either. What doesn't mean that it is impossible to find the situations in poems. It simply means that poems can't lay everything out for you in detail because there isn't

room. So poems have to give you the most important information and hint at the rest of the situation.

Then how can you pick up the rest of the situation of a poem?

There are two good ways to expand the situation of a poem. First, you have to pay close attention to the information a poem does give you directly. As I said a poem will usually have the most significant parts of its situation out where you can see them. What you have to do to get more information is watch for the hints those parts give. If a poem says that a man has thinning gray hair, you would know without being told that he was probably old. Or if a poem described the trees on a hill as wet and bare, you could be sure that it was winter. If you keep you eye on what a poem does tell you, you will find more than you thought was there.

But how can you fill out the situation of a poem if you want to know something the poem doesn't even hint at?

That problem is where you have to work for what you get from a poem. A poem can't give you the gift of its communication in a neatly wrapped package. Often you will have to complete the situation of a poem yourself to get its communication. That means you have to get involved in the situation of the poem and fill it out with information from your own life.

Is there any way for the reader to know how he should round out the situation of a poem?

You have the same guide we have been using all along to help us hear more than can be said in a poem and that is your feelings. Your impression of a poem came from the poem; so when you put things in the situation of a poem that you feel should be there, you are working off communication you got from the poem. You are simply taking your part in a poem when you expand it in the ways that seem right to you. This expansion is the second, and probably the most important, way that the reader can fill out the situation of a poem.

Are you wondering why the reader has to do so much work to find out what's going on in a poem?

I can only say that that's the way poems are. And I think poems have to be that way because they are trying to do something that is very difficult - communicate feelings. If you remember, we said earlier that we communicate our feelings by trying to make the other person feel the same thing we felt. Which means that the other person has to meet you half way. Or it means with poems that the reader has to get in there and get involved; he has to fill out the situation in his own terms, and he has to let himself feel something.

The words of a poem are only the beginning of its communication. If you want to get something from the poem you have to expand the poem into your own life and carry it the rest of the way yourself.

Enough on what you do when you read a poem. Let's look at a short poem and see how expanding a poem works. I would like for you to read the following poem by William Stafford twice. We will start with your feeling and try to expand the poem into a situation you can recognize as the source of your feeling.

Fall Wind

Pods of summer crowd around the door;

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Traveling through the Dark

Would you say you have an up feeling or a down feeling from reading the poem?

The poem does not leave an impression of happiness or joy. It seems calm and reflective. It has a feeling of seriousness about it. Also a touch of cold.

Would you say the poem leaves you with a feeling of sadness?

Maybe it would be better to say that the poem leaves you with an awareness of being cold. Since the title of the poem is "Fall Wind," you could be feeling the kind of sadness you experience when you realize that fall is coming. Look at the poem again.

Are you just feeling sad because fall is coming?

I think the poem hits closer to home than just the realization that fall is coming. Here is where we need to expand the poem into a human situation by making ourselves the I in the poem. That way we can find out if our feeling comes from something more than just suddenly noticing the first cold wind of fall.

What is the setting of this poem?

Obviously we are somewhere with a lot of trees around the houses. It might be the country or it could be an old part of a town or city where there are a lot of big trees. In any case, the trees are old enough to have whole crowds of seed pods. Noticing those trees is important because they are also a way we know fall is coming.

How would you describe the "I" in the poem since he is the only character?

You don't have to say he's any particular age, but he describes himself by referring to the autumn in his hands. He might be hinting that he's middle aged. Whatever age he is, he's the kind of person who takes time to notice that fall is coming and seems to feel that he takes part in the changes of the natural world.

How would you expand this poem into a little story?

You could say that the I in the poem walked out the door of his house. On the ground he noticed the seed pods that had fallen from the trees. He realized that summer was coming to an end. Then he remembered that he heard a wind last night that was different from the usual summer breeze. The wind wasn't strong but it was cold, and it made him shiver. In fact it made him shiver twice.

Why does the wind make you shiver twice?

One shiver would seem enough for the first cold wind of fall. The second shiver must have been for something else. The second shiver must be the one that hit closer to home and made you feel sad.

This next question is one only you can answer because it is one in which you complete the poem inside yourself. Look at the last line of the poem again.

Does that second shiver mean that the first cold wind of fall has made you realize something important about yourself?

It wasn't hard to expand the Stafford poem. It only took two things - listening to the hints the poem gave and making the experience of the poem come alive by letting it be your experience too. Now let's try expanding and experiencing a longer poem. This poem is by Alden Nowlan.

Weakness

Old mare whose eyes

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Playing the Jesus Game

What was the first thing that came to your mind after you read the Nowlan poem?

Stop where you are and don't try to say anything more for a moment. We need to find out what kind of feeling that thought represents. Don't lose touch with the poem, but try to sit still for just long enough to give yourself a chance to listen to what is going on inside you.

Can you say what feelings are going through your body?

I would imagine that no matter what you said, you did not say that you were calm and relaxed. You may have noticed that you are feeling tense. Or you might have felt sensations of tightness and anxiousness. In any case, I'm sure you have no doubt that your feeling is a strong one.

So what would you call that feeling?

That wasn't a hard question. You knew without thinking that you are mad and upset. You could also be having trouble believing that anybody would do such a thing.

Who or what are you angry at?

Again you had no problem coming up with the answer. You are mad at the father in the poem.

Why are you so upset with this man?

If the man really is going to shoot the horse (Do you think he is?) and doesn't have a very good reason for doing it, then you should be hostile to him. But before you start hitting this man, perhaps you should find out if he really is that cruel. Look at the poem again.

Why is the man going to shoot the horse?

The horse is old and obviously very sick. She must be hurt inside if she's drooling blood. I don't see how she can live much longer in that shape. There's no reason to make the horse suffer a slow and painful death.

Would the man be doing the humane thing if he did shoot the horse?

It certainly seems like shooting the horse is the only thing that can be done for her. Since the man is a farmer, I doubt if he would shoot an animal that he needs if there were any way to save it. In fact, you could say the man is being kind to the mare by ending her suffering.

Has your feeling about the father changed?

So you still don't like him. That's strange. Here is a man who is doing something humane for a helpless animal, but you don't feel good toward him for what he is doing. Maybe there's something going on in this poem that we've missed so far. Now would seem like a good time to expand the situation of this poem into a play so we can get a better look at what is taking place.

How much do you know about the setting of this poem?

It obviously takes place on a farm. Probably a small farm that the man and his family work by themselves. Right now the most important place on that farm is the barn.

Who are the characters we find in this barn?

A man and a horse. The horse is old and dying. The man owns the horse. I would imagine this is a horse he has had for a long time. He seems the kind of farmer who has to work hard to make a living and would be too careful about his money to buy a sick horse.

What else do you know about the man?

He hates weakness. He is a tough and practical person. He probably believes that people ought to go ahead and do whatever needs to be done without letting a weakness like their feelings get in the way. So this man is going to shoot the horse because he knows it has to be done.

Are there any other characters?

The person speaking in the poem must be somewhere in the barn since he knows what is going on. I would guess that the other person is the man's son. He doesn't do anything in our play but watch.

What is taking place in the barn?

The father has decided to shoot the mare. He has planned the best way to handle the shooting. The night before he is to shoot the horse, the man goes out to the barn, probably to see how the horse is doing. As he is leaving the stable, the man turns back to the mare and starts cursing her. But as he is yelling, the father goes to the mare and puts his coat over her to keep her warm.

Do you see anything strange in our play?

The father is acting very strangely for a calm and practical man. The way in which he will handle shooting the horse shows that he is not an emotional person. But here the man is acting very emotional and unreasonable. He is yelling at the horse for something she can't help.

Is it possible that you dislike the father not because he has to shoot the horse but because he is going about it in a way that seems unnecessarily cruel?

The man is acting like he hates the horse and is glad to see her out of the way. But, if he is a practical man, he knows the horse can't help being old and sick. And besides, the fact that he puts his coat on the horse would seem to indicate that he wants to be kind to her. It's hard to understand why the man can't act kind when he is doing something kind.

Do you usually curse the people you are trying to help?

The way the father's acting doesn't make any sense. The two feelings that we see him expressing contradict each other. It's hard to tell what his real feeling is. It almost seems like the man wants to be kind but doesn't know how to go about it.

What reason could he have for cursing the horse?

Let's go back to the other character in this play. He has been watching all of this. He has seen his father try to hide the fact that he cares about the horse. The boy now knows that even his tough, practical father doesn't like having to shoot their horse even if it is the right thing to do. This may be the first time the son has seen that his father has tender feelings under that strong and stern cover. And he may be wondering why his father can't just go ahead and show his feelings.

How do you think the boy feels about his father's hatred of "weakness" now?

Taking a closer look at the situation in Alden Nowlan's poem helped us clarify our feelings about the poem. Expanding poems is more than just a fun exercise; it helps us get to know the poems better. Our expansion of the Nowlan poem shows us that, just as with our first impressions of people, we sometimes need more information before we try to pass judgement.

I don't mean that we shouldn't pay any attention to our first impressions of poems. We need that first response as a starting point for getting to know poems, but we should remember that our feelings need to grow as our awareness of the poems grows. Our first view of a poem is often too narrow, and thus we need to be able to change it as we expand the situation of the poem and understand more about it as a human event. There's no law that says that we are stuck with our first impressions of people or poems.

Look at the Stafford poem, "Traveling through the Dark," and see if you still feel the same way about it.

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Traveling through the Dark

Are you still upset by what happens in the poem?

The last time we looked at this poem, we said it left us frustrated. Frustration implies a situation in which there is a problem we can't resolve. Let's expand "Traveling through the Dark" and find out what is so disturbing in the situation of the poem.

Where does the frustrating event in this poem occur?

The setting is one we usually don't associate with things like frustration. It appears that we are on road in a wilderness area. I'm sure the woods and river would generally affect us deeply by their natural beauty. It seems like the kind of place where we would be thinking about the freedom and peacefulness of an uncivilized world rather than worrying about wild animals getting hit by cars.

Who are the characters in this situation?

Certainly the most important character is the "I" in the poem. He is the center of the conflict that is bothering us.

What kind of person is the speaker?

He seems to be a sensitive individual. He doesn't want to just push the deer into the river and try to forget the whole thing. He also seems like a concerned and caring person because he stops to

move the deer out of the road so other drivers won't get killed trying to miss it. I would say he has a deep respect for life in any form.

Who are the other characters that the speaker is including in the term "our group"?

I have the impression that this man is out driving alone; so he can't be referring to other people. He must be talking about the deer and her fawn. And since he has just been talking about his car, I think he would include the car in the situation.

Why does the car figure as a character in "our group?"

Obviously the car plays an important part in the story of this poem. Let's see if we can describe that story.

What happens in the poem that is the source of our frustration?

The man is driving along the river road one night. He comes upon the body of deer in the road and stops to move the deer so no one will get killed by swerving to miss it. As he goes to drag the body off, he discovers that it is a doe and that her fawn is still alive inside her. The man hesitates to think about what he is doing. Then he goes ahead and pushes the deer into the river.

Why does the man stop and think?

He doesn't want to kill the fawn. He would like to save it, but he knows he can't leave the deer where it is because it would be a danger to other drivers. He stops because he's not sure what he should do.

Can you think of any way the man could have saved the fawn?

The man evidently couldn't think of anything either. Thus the only thing he can do is push the deer in the river. I'm sure he doesn't feel good about doing it even though he knows he has to. He doesn't seem like the kind of person who would try to reassure himself by saying that it's just an animal.

Do you see that the conflict in this poem is one of wanting to go

both ways at once"

There is more to this poem that just the information the speaker gives us directly about what happens. The things that go through the man's mind as he is standing there thinking are important to our feeling of frustration. He doesn't tell us what he thought, but I'll bet there are hints to what he was thinking in the poem. And we should be able to find them in the way he tells us about the situation. In the next class, we will look at the language of the poem to see some ways we can pick up those hints.

Before we stop today, I want to give you the chance to work on a poem on your own. I think you understand how your feelings about a poem are connected to the experience of the poem and now the things that happen in the poem are connected to the poem's communication. I want you to read the following poem by Robert Bly and then expand it into your own experience so you can express the feeling it communicates to you.

Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Silence in the Snowy Fields

CHAPTER FIVE

(the third class)

1

The third class meeting will take the student even deeper into the forest of the expanded poem. The last class left him standing in his own experience of the beauty of the forest. Now I want to show the student how to move around and notice the different trees that go together to create that beauty.

Thus far the student's information about the expanded poem has come entirely from his experience of the poem. Once he is aware of that experience, I think the student is ready to gather even more information about the poem's communication by looking at the language of the poem. From this exploration, I want the student to recognize that his response to the poem was not an accident but the result of the poem's ability to interact with him through its language.

In this session I will try to point out some of the ways in which the communication of poems is influenced and achieved by the smaller effects in their language. I want to show the student how four of the language devices mentioned in the third question of the outline - tone, image, association, and metaphor - can affect his response to a poem. I am not going to try to work with sound devices in this class because they are better done out loud.

The Third Day

We have looked at poems as feelings. We have looked at poems as human situations. And poems do expand into those things after

we establish contact with them. But if we are going to understand poems fully as communication, we also need to look at the way poems get to us - and that is through language.

Poems communicate through the same language that we use when we speak to each other. In fact, when we read a poem, we usually assume that someone is speaking to us. One of the most important points in picking up the communication of poems is to remember that they work as language in much the same way as spoken communication.

When people speak to each other, they don't try to communicate through the dictionary meanings of their statements alone. They phrase and word their speech to affect the person listening in a way that helps their communication. With this use of emphasis and coloration, they are able to get around some of the problems we have in making the language say what we want it to say.

Poems also communicate through the effect they have on us. As we said earlier, a poem affects our feelings by offering us a situation in which we can experience and feel too. But you can't just pick up a ready-made situation and drop it into a poem. The situation of a poem has to be created for us from the language of the poem.

If the situation of a poem is going to have an influence on our feelings, the poem is going to have to do more than just tell us what the situation is. It has to give us an impression of what that situation is like so we can respond to what is going on. And a poem creates that impression by affecting us in the same way people do in their speech. It uses the language of the poem for emphasis and coloration.

The language of a poem contains many words and phrases that are used because they have their own influence on our feelings. These language effects work together to give us a particular view of the poem's situation. In the language of a poem, all the smaller effects lead to one impression which gives the poem its total effect on our feelings.

After we have looked at our experience with a poem, we need to look at the language of the poem for two reasons. If we recognize the small effects that helped create the situation of a poem, we understand that situation better. And if we find out how those small effects worked together to influence our feelings, we can see more about the direction in which the poem wants our feelings to go. All of this information can help us see what the

poem is trying to communicate to us.

Can you think of any way we can use to find the small effects in the language of a poem?

If you said by using our feelings, then you've got a pretty good idea of how poems communicate. We followed our feelings into a poem to find out what was going on in the poem; so why shouldn't we follow our feelings to see how the poem is trying to influence our response to its situation.

Again we are going to be looking for hints. The small effects in the language of a poem won't be clearly marked. We are going to have to look for the things in the poem that seem important to our feelings about the poem. It won't do any good to look for these effects for the sake of looking. We can only get information from the language of the poem if we look for the things that had an influence on us.

I would like for you to read the following poem by David Ignatow. After we have looked at your feelings about the poem and what you responded to in the poem, then we can look for the little things in the poem that played an important part in how you experienced the poem.

Nice Guy

I had a friend and he died. Me.

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Rescue the Dead

To start with, how did you feel after you read the poem?

Sometimes not feeling anything is a feeling itself. You probably weren't able to pick up on any kind of feeling inside yourself. It could be that the poem leaves you feeling numb or dead inside.

What's going on in this poem?

A man is talking about a friend who died. The friend died while the man was at work. The man tells us that he misses his friend and that in his opinion the friend was a good guy. He also says, though not very loud, that the friend was himself.

How could a dead man be talking to us about his own death?

Maybe the man doesn't mean he actually died. He could be trying to say that a part of him died. Or he might mean that he lost an important part of his life. In any case, he wants us to know that he feels bad about the death.

Then why don't you feel sorry for the man?

You don't know the man personally, so you've got no reason to turn against him and withhold your sympathy. There must be something going on in the poem that we aren't aware of. Let's look closer and see if there's anything in the language of the poem that could be influencing our responses.

We mentioned earlier that with poems we assume someone is speaking to us. That's a good thing to remember when you're following your feelings back to the small effects of a poem.

If you were listening to someone telling you something, you would not only be aware of their words, but you would also be listening to the kind of voice they were using. It might also be good to notice the voice of a poem. We could say that we are listening to the tone of voice of the speaker or the tone of the

poem.

In one of the first poems we read, there is a good example of how the speaker's tone of voice can influence our response to the situation of a poem. Look back at William Carlos William's poem, "This Is Just to Say." If you remember, we said the situation in the poem seemed unpleasant, bu we didn't feel down about the poem. Read the last four lines of "This is Just to Say" out loud.

Does the tone of the last four lines make you feel good?

In the last four lines, the man is happy. He's not trying to be mean or cruel. He feels good because he enjoyed the plums. You find it hard to be mad at the man because he enjoyed the plums so much.

How would you describe the tone of voice of the man in the Ignatow poem?

It's hard to describe. It's like no tone at all. There's no expression in his voice. The best you could say is that he is speaking in a flat tone.

Does that seem strange considering what the man is telling you?

Another thing that people do to add life and effectiveness to their speech is to use description. There is description in the language of poems, too. It usually comes in the form of images that help you picture people or places. Images add depth and color to the language of poems by helping you visualize their situations.

You might remember how much being able to visualize the setting helped in Robert Bly's poem, " Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter." You could not have picked up on the feeling of being alone if you had not been able to see the deserted street. And touching the cold mailbox made you feel like you were really there.

Does the swirling snow make you feel like you are very much by yourself?

The snow cuts you off from other people. It's like a curtain or a robe around you. These images help the poem communicate the feeling that privacy can be good for you. Being alone is a good way

to "waste time."

Are there any images that stand out in the Ignatów poem?

There's one image that hits you funny. The man speaking is lying on his couch telling you about his friend. He is evidently relaxed and comfortable.

How does the image contradict what the man is saying?

The man is saying that he misses his "friend" because he liked him and cared about him. But he doesn't seem very concerned that he's gone. It's hard to tell if the loss has affected him at all.

Do people usually act so unemotional about death and loss?

It's also strange that the man waited until he got home to mourn his friend. He says that he was too busy at work to stop and feel sorry. I find it hard to believe that he could hold back his feelings like that. It seems more like he really doesn't feel anything.

Does the man's emotionless voice and his unconcerned posture tell you anything about what part of himself he may have lost?

There are other small effects that are used in the language of poems. They too depend on your responding with your feelings and senses. They often seem so natural that you may not have noticed that they were affecting you. Two of them are particularly important in this poem by James Wright.

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from The Branch Will Not Break

How did your feelings go with this poem?

I would imagine your feelings started off slowly and calmly. You may have even felt peaceful. Then, I'm sure they rose to a very high point. I think you could definitely say this poem makes you feel lifted.

What words would you use to describe you feelings?

However you described your feelings, I think you would have to say they were strong. Whatever happens to you in this poem, it seems to pick you up and carry you to an intense point. Let's see if we can figure out what did happen to you in this situation.

What are the things other than just place that you notice about the setting of the poem?

For one thing it is evening. It's that quiet time between sunset and dark when everything is still and peaceful and gentle. Dark is just showing up in the shadows around the trees and grass, and,

since the grass in the field is still young, it must be spring. Also, I feel we must be somewhere out in the country away from other people.

Who do we find in this setting?

Two people and two horses. The people are friends and have possibly been together all day. The horses seem to be alone in the pasture.

Could you expand the poem into a story with yourself in the point of view of the "I"?

We stopped the car beside a pasture. I crossed the fence and walked gently on the soft grass. When I looked up I saw two horses coming toward me as if to say, hello. The horses were playful and seemed to enjoy nuzzling each other. The young mare came up to me and I touched her. It felt good to rub her nose because it was so silky and smooth. I felt like I've never been so alive and free in my life. The good feeling was so strong that I felt like I could explode.

I don't think it was just chance that you felt good when you read this poem. This poem has in it a number of small effects that could move you very deeply. If we want to know why this experience felt so good, we could look at some of those effects.

There is one quality of language that seems particularly strong in the Wright poem. I call that quality "association." Certain words in the poem carry with them definite bodies of feelings or sensations. The feelings and sensations are ones we commonly connect with the things the words refer to. Those feelings are like the personality of the words, and we associate certain characteristics with words just like we do with people.

Before you look for some of the associations in "A Blessing" that had a strong influence on you, let me give you an example of what you are looking for. Go back to the Stafford poem, "Fall Wind," in the last chapter. It seems to draw heavily on a common association.

What characteristics or qualities do you associate with the fall season?

Fall is a time of harvest. It is also a time when things stop

growing and begin to die. A man in late middle age could say he was in the fall of his li[illegible].

The seasons have many characteristics that we associate with our own lives. We recognize within ourselves the same cycle of birth, growth and death. We not only respond to the seasons for what they represent in the life process, but we use the seasons to describe the progression of our own lives.

What comes to man in the winter of his life?

The situation of "A Blessing" also depends on a particularly strong association. Most people have good feelings about horses. They are beautiful animals who have an air of strength and grace about them. They can also be gentle and affectionate. Somewhere, deep down inside us, horses make us feel like they have the quickness and power of life.

How would you have felt about the poem if there had been cows instead of horses in the pasture?

The Wright poem ends with another strong effect of language. The effect is used to describe the intense feeling that builds in the poem. It is a strange kind of description, however, because it says the feeli g is something it is not.

Sometimes we can't find enough words to describe the characteristics of a thing. That's when we turn to comparison for help. We bring in something else and use its qualities to help us create an impression of the thing we are trying to describe. We know the first thing doesn't have the same characteristics as the second thing, but we point to their similiarities to show that the first thing makes us feel like the second thing.

This kind of description through comparison is called metaphor. We use it all the time in our ordinary speech. We often say things like, "You know how he is, he's like so-in-so." There is a metaphor in the first of the Wright poem that helps us get the feeling of the setting. Look at the line, "Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass."

What is the twilight compared to?

We know that twilight can't bound. Animals, like rabbits, bound forth on us. But the twilight does come quietly and

quickly. And it is like a dark furry animal. We get the feeling of the soft twilight much better if we think of it as coming like a rabbit.'

In the last of this poem, we also know that a feeling is not something that can have a blossom. But if you feel something strongly, you might say it feels like you could blossom out like a flower. The feeling is so strong that it wants to burst out of you. But, we don't know what a feeling looks like outside our bodies. We do, however, know about flowers.

Do you feel good or bad when you go out on a spring morning and see that the jonquils have come into bloom?

Talking about flowers is a good way to show how metaphor works. It draws on the associations we have for other things in its comparison. The intense feeling in the Wright poem is compared to a flower blossoming because we feel good about flowers in bloom. The metaphor makes the feeling come alive in us because it describes it as a sensation - bursting forth.

All of these language effects help give life to the situation of a poem. They bring the world into us through our feelings and sensations. By working together and drawing on each other they make the poem real to our sight and touch and feel. The result is that the poem affects us like an experience from our lives.

Let's now go back to a poem that we've looked at so many times it seems that its always been a part of our lives. We can learn even more about Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" by tracing our feelings back to the influences in its language. Here's the poem again.

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Traveling through the Dark

Which image in the poem is most important to your feeling of frustration with the poem?

Obviously, the image of the dead deer beside the road is an important influence on our frustration. But that image does not create our full frustration. It needs to be widened to include all of "our group." Seeing the man standing in the wilderness looking at the body of the deer behind his car brings home everything in the poem that is troubling us.

Why is this image so important?

The image of "our group" is the setting for the decision we must make. The man is standing there thinking about what he should do. All the characters in this image play a part in his thoughts.

Other effects in the language of the poem can tell us some of what was going on through the man's mind as he "thought hard for us all." The associations in the poem have a particularly strong effect on us. For example, look at our associations with deer.

Would the poem have affected you the same way if the deer had been a goat?

Of course not, we think of deer as beautiful animals. They are

soft and gentle, and running is their only defense. We feel like deer should be protected.

What about the associations we have for a wilderness setting?

We probably feel that it too needs our protection. There is a kind of life in a natural setting that we can't get in touch with through civilization. That way of living seems open and clean and free. We know there are dangers, but they seem like understandable dangers because they aren't man-made.

The language of the poem also gives us a vivid impression of the car. This effect comes from a piece of comparison that tells us some what the man thinks of the car. Look at the metaphors used to describe the car.

Do you feel good or bad about the car?

I think the language of the poem has a negative influence on our feelings about the car. Its engine is purring like some giant cat. And the exhaust is warm and red, like blood. I have the feeling that we are to get the impression that the car is like a killer animal.

Let's look at what we know about the situation of "our group." The man is standing beside the road thinking. He has a good feeling for the deer and her fawn and bad feelings about the car. He feels like the natural life of the wilderness is waiting to see what he is going to do. And he is thinking about his responsibility to his fellow man. From these thoughts he must make his decision.

We won't say any more in this session about the decision we face. Next time we will look at everything we know about the poem and try to put all the parts together to see if we can decide where its communication is leading. We have our information and now we need to go inside ourselves to stand and think.

Again, I want to give you a poem to look at on your own. You can look at it as feeling, as experience, as situation and as language. Just remember to put it back together before you try to decide what is has communicated to you. The poem is by Stephen Mooney.

The Mountain Sings

The mountain looks back

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Selves

CHAPTER SIX

(the fourth class)

1

Now that we have gotten the student into the forest of the expanded poem, we need to help him find his way out and back into his life. The experience he had with the poem will be worthless to him unless he can bring it back to his own personal context. There the student can decide if the experience matters to him and, if it does, what it all means to his life.

This class session will be built around the direction described in the fourth question of the outline. And that direction is toward more questions. It would be natural to expect that the last class would bring the student's searching to a neat conclusion. But in the approach of expanding poems, pat answers simply do not appear. Once a poem is expanded into the reader's life, it continues unfolding into more possibilities and more questions.

The only way the student can get out of the forest is to make some decisions for himself. The purpose of this last session is not to hand the student a reward for exploring poems, but to show him that the only rewards he gets from poems are the ones he earns. I want the student to realize that expanding poems is no different from the work he has to do to understand other things in his life. But if the student finds a poem to be an important concern in his life, it won't be work. Making decisions about the poem will come naturally for him.

The Fourth Day

We have talked a lot about how poems communicate through

the effect they have on us as readers. With everything that's been said about the work the poem does, I hope you haven't missed a very basic point about poems — they can't get along without you. And not only does a poem need for you to be there; it needs you alive and warm and kicking.

Poems are worthless if the reader is passive. The reader can't just sit there and be acted upon because the words of a poem are only the beginning of its communication. And that communication won't get into your life where you can deal with it if you sit back and wait for the words to seep in through a process of osmosis.

Poetry is a process of getting together with a poem and interacting. The poem brings its part of the communication and you have to bring the rest. We have said all along that you have to get in there and take part to get anything from a poem. Well, when it comes to getting the communication of a poem, your work isn't done.

The poem has done all it can when it has given you the information about its communication that we have been gathering in the last three classes. But the poem can't tell you what communication that information represents for you. It is up to you to take the information the rest of the way and see what it communicates.

We have been approaching poems like we would anything else in our lives that needed consideration. Let's carry that approach on to its logical end when we're finding the communication of poems. After something has happened to you and you have experienced it and looked at it, then you have to make some final decisions about how it fits in your life. It's up to you to make those decisions about poems too.

When you're trying to decide what a poem has communicated to you, you have to draw on yourself as much as on the poem. After you've gotten the information about a poem's communication, you must look to yourself to see what that information means to you. The significance which your experience with a poem has in your life is the poem's communication. And no one can decide about that significance for you — not the poem and not the teacher.

Thus far, I've been asking you questions to help you look for the information in poems. We are now at the point where my questions can't help you do your work. My questions can only ask the things I want to know and do not necessarily ask the things

you feel you need to know. All I can do to help from here on is to help you get in position to ask your own questions.

This much I can give you as a starting point: try holding your experience with the poem in one hand and your thoughts and feelings about your life in the other. Then bring your hands together and see where the poem touches things that are important to you in your life. When you express your understanding of the places where the two meet, you will be expressing what the poem has communicated to you.

Now let's look at a poem by Mark Strand. Since I can't tell you more about expressing what you've found in poems, we'll have to learn by doing. We will expand the poem together, and then you can carry it the rest of the way on your own.

Eating Poetry

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Reasons for Moving

Without thinking about defining it, what did you feel when you read this poem?

No doubt your needle went way up. This poem sends out a lot of energy. It has a frantic feel about it. But it's also confusing. There is something strange going on here. You have the feeling you are taking part in something unusual.

What are you taking part in?

The whole situation is so strange its hard to tell at first. I know we are in a library, and I know it's not the way libraries usually are.

Who are the people in this situation?

There's a man and a librarian. The librarian seems very typical. She's nervous and fidgety, but she wants to keep everything under control. She's got that strange blend of authority and hysteria you often find in librarians.

What about the man?

There's nothing typical about him. I've never seen anybody act the way he's acting in a library. There have been times I've wished someone would let loose in a library but I've never actually seen anyone do it.

What happens when the wild man and the librarian come together?

The man is eating poems, and he is enjoying himself. The librarian comes up and sees him, but she can't handle it. She starts walking around in circles, and then starts to cry. The man thinks the librarian doesn't understand. He wants her to know he's having fun and she shouldn't be upset about it. He gets on his knees to lick her hand so she'll know he's friendly. But she screams. The man decides the hell with the librarian and goes romping off through the library.

Well, now even though we know what the situation is the poem still seems strange. I know what happens, but I'm not sure why it happens. Let's look at some of the influences in the language of the poem to see if we can find out more of what's going on in the

poem.

What effect does the tone of the poem have on you?

It doesn't make you unhappy like the librarian. In fact it makes you feel positive and good. You could even say that the tone of this poem is wild and ecstatic.

How about the images in the poem that stand out to you?

I'd say there are two. First there's the image of the man eating poems. He's got a big smile on his face and that's ink running from the corners of his mouth. He's obviously happy. Also in this image is the librarian. She's anything but happy, she's about to go to pieces. The contrast between the two is very striking.

What's the other image that has a strong effect on you?

The second one is even stronger. The librarian is standing there trying to hold herself together. The man is on his hands and knees about to lick her hand like a dog. He's still happy and friendly, but she's terrified.

How are the associations we have for dogs at work in this poem?

Let's look at what dogs are. They are domesticated animals. That means they were once wild, but now they have been tamed to do what man wants them to do. Most dogs are friendly and affectionate, but they can revert to their untamed side if people don't treat them right.

What are the dogs on the basement stairs like?

They're obviously wild. Their eyeballs are rolling and their hair is standing up everywhere. It seems like they are coming up from the basement to take over the library. You could say this library is going to the dogs.

What are libraries usually like?

I think most of us have some unpleasant associations with libraries. They should be good places because their books are a

source of knowledge. But that knowledge is usually hard to get to. There are always rules and people who get in-between you and what you need. It's hard to feel good in a library because everything is so quiet and restrained and tightly controlled.

How does the lighting in this library change during the course of the poem?

Libraries are usually brightly lit places. But half way through the poem the dogs are coming up the basement stairs, and the lights are dim. At the end of the poem when the man is running around like a playful dog, the lights are out and it is dark.

What association with light do you think is being used in the language of the poem?

We think of light as good. We also think of light as knowledge, and knowledge dispells darkness. As we gained more knowledge we outgrew the primitive dark ages and came into the light of civilization. By gaining knowledge we tamed ourselves.

How are dogs used as a metaphor in the poem?

The man is compared to a dog. He was trained to come to the library and act in a certain way. But he couldn't get the knowledge he needed when he acted domesticated. So he went after the poems in a wild way. He didn't want to hurt anybody. He was just unsatisfied being tame.

How do you feel when you're in a library?

I can't decide for you how you feel about libraries, nor can I decide for you what the poem has communicated to you about knowledge and what the experience of getting it should be like. I can give you this question to help you start expressing your thoughts.

Why do you think the man is transformed into a dog when he eats the poems?

I call this approach to poems that we have been working with "expanding poems." I could have just as easily called it "eating

poems." The idea is the same – to get anything out of poems you've got to get them inside you, and yourself inside them. But you can't do that if you set up a bunch of rules that get between you and the poems.

Here's another poem for you to chew on. Read it a couple of times, and then we will expand it together. The poem is by Gary Snyder.

Hay for the Horses

He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
behind the barn.
With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle–cracks of light,
Itch of haydust in the
sweaty shirt and shoes.
At lunchtime under Black Oak
Out in the hot corral,
–The old mare nosing lunchpails,
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds–
"I'm sixty-eight," he said,
"I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my life.
And damn it, that's just what
I've gone and done."

from Riprap and Cold Mt. Poems

How do you feel about this poem?

What you get out of this poem will depend a lot on you. The poem offers you an experience, but it doesn't pass judgment on it. You could have felt amused after you read this poem or you could have gone in the opposite direction and felt sad.

Let's push this poem right up against you and approach talking about it as if you were there. You could say that this poem is a story you are telling about a man you once knew.

Where did you know this man?

You were working on a horse farm one summer. The old man drove in early one morning, with a truck load of hay. He worked on another ranch that sold hay and he usually made deliveries for them. He helped you and the other hands stack the bales in the barn.

What kind of work is stacking hay?

It's got to be the worst in the world. Maybe worse than digging ditches. You get hay and dust in your clothes and you itch like crazy.

What can you tell us about the old man himself?

He ate lunch with you out in the corral and he got to talking about his life. He said he was 68 years old and he'd been bucking hay since he was 17. He hadn't planned on staying with the job, but that's what he ended up doing.

How old were you that summer?

I've got a feeling you were close to 17. You were working on the ranch for the summer while you were out of school. And you had no intention of bucking hay for the rest of your life.

Why don't you want to buck hay for the rest of your life?

Because it's miserable work and it doesn't pay much. It's okay for a summer job, but if you are going to make anything out of your life you are going to have to move on to something better.

Then, do you think the old man has wasted his life?

Well, it sure doesn't seem like he's made much of a success. If he's 68 years old and the best he's ever had is a job where he has to drive all night and unload hay all day, then it certainly would seem like he doesn't have much to show for his life.

Do you feel like the old man thinks he has wasted his life?

That's one I can't help you with. It's a decision you've got to make for yourself. All I can do is suggest you look at something before you make your decision. There's one effect in the language of the poem that has a large influence on how you feel about the old man. Read the last six lines of the poem out loud.

Is there a tone of self-pity or a tone of pride and self-irony in what the old man says?

The way you answer that question will depend on what you think is important in the old man's life. It will also depend on how you feel about your own life and on what is important to you. Don't forget that you play a part in what this poem is communicating.

Now let's go back to the William Stafford poem, "Traveling Through the Dark." The last time we looked at the poem we left you standing beside the road trying to make a decision. Before we talk about that decision, you should read the poem again.

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Traveling through the Dark

The man in the poem pushed the deer into the river. But I don't think that relieved his frustration or ours. What he did solved the problem, but it certainly wasn't a very satisfactory solution.

Why do you think the man went ahead and pushed the deer into the river?

There was nothing else he could do. He couldn't save the fawn, and he had to save other people that might be driving along the road.

Well, if the man did what was right, then why are we left with such a feeling of frustration?

I think the poem is bigger than just this one situation. In fact, I think this situation, or one like it in many ways, has happened hundreds of times before in this country. The characters may change, but the problem is always the same.

Look around in your life and see what happens when someone has to make a decision about man, machine, and wilderness. Then try this last question to see if it helps you make up your mind about the communication you've gotten from this poem.

Why does one of the three characters always have to lose out when "our group" gets together?

One last thought on expanding poems. There is a step that goes beyond expanding a poem into your own life, and that is expanding it into someone else's life. That expansion is simple –

just share poems and your thoughts on the poems with another person or two in your life.

I offer this poem by Wendell Berry. I think it is one of the best love poems I have ever read. I hope you like it.

The Cold

How exactly good it is

MATERIAL REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

from Openings

CHAPTER SEVEN

(suggestions)

We are back talking teacher to teacher again. I have shown you all of the approach of expanding poems that I can get on paper. What you do or do not do with the things we have talked about here is a matter for your own decision. For my part, I want to round out this book with a few suggestions on how the approach could be used in the classroom.

1

If you have made it this far in the book, you probably have accepted my premise that poems can not be taught as though they had single exact meanings. (If you still have some doubts, try asking five English teachers for "the meaning" of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.") But you may still be uncomfortable about whether or not your students will get anything from poems if you do not help them find some kind of meaning.

My suggestion for your relief on that point is quite simple. All you need to do is keep in mind that the purpose of teaching poetry is to teach poems and not to teach just meanings. Your students can find their own meanings in the poems you teach, but they may have trouble finding meaning in your meanings. So trust your students and trust the poems; they can do a great many things together that you probably will never see taking place.

2

Perhaps I can go one step further on this business of getting some kind of meaning from poems in the classroom. I have a thought that seems like the best way for a class to settle on what meaning it has found in a poem. The poem got started through interaction; so why not let its communication be completed through interaction. I mean let the students interact with one another in deciding what a poem is trying to communicate.

This process of decision through sharing has several advantages in the classroom. The most important benefit is that it would give the students a push in expressing their individual understandings of a poem. Also such interaction would let each student be right in his personal understanding but at the same time open to anything he can learn from the rest of the class. When students share in developing the class's understanding of a poem, they share in the understanding too.

3

This suggestion is actually a thought on who the teacher is in the classroom. And I think the teacher is a living example and not just a dispenser of information and a final authority on correct and incorrect. The basic question I am working with is what are we trying to teach when we take poems into the classroom - information about the poems or an attitude about poetry that will allow the students to find their own information.

It seems to me that finally the most we can hope to teach is an attitude. The students will remember not so much what we say about poems as how we said it. So I recommend that when you teach poetry, you try to teach poems that you like and are interested in. The main thing your students will learn from you in a poetry unit is how you personally feel about poetry, and there is a good chance that your attitude will become their attitude.

4

The next thing I would suggest is to let everybody in the class

have a shot at teaching poems they like. If you want your students to get involved in working with poems, then let them involve themselves. All they need is the chance to bring in poems they like and expand them for the class. You would be surprised how involved a student can become in a poem he believes in, and you would also be surprised at how interested the rest of the class will be in his feelings about the poem.

5

A key to getting your students involved in poems is how you make the poems available. Get away from the textbook as much as possible and bring in as many small anthologies of poems as you can find and afford. Your students can use the anthologies as sources for the poems they use in class. (It helps to tell the students you got a poem from a certain book or anthology.)

Another hint in the same vein is to try mimeographing as many poems as you can of the ones you use. Putting the poems on separate sheets helps present them as poems and not as parts of a textbook. Mimeographing also makes the business of teaching poetry more personal because it makes the students feel like you are giving them the poems.

I am going to include a list of small anthologies at the end of this chapter. Most of the anthologies are collections of contemporary poems because I feel that they usually come closest to dealing with things the students are interested in.

6

I have another suggestion that concerns that old bugaboo of teaching the poetry unit. And my thought on that is bluntly that we do not need it anymore. From what I can tell, the poetry unit has become a matter of wading through a certain amount of material on poetry. And there has to be a more palatable way to bring poems into the classroom.

If our aim is to give the students the opportunity for a good experience with a few poems, then why do we need a long and involved poetry unit? Why not break up the unit into two or three

day sessions and spread it out over the whole year? That way working with poems becomes a relief from other work and does not itself strain the students' attention and interest by running on too long. Poetry is usually too strong to take in large doses.

7

I want to offer this last thought on bringing poems into the classroom. It is better to bring them in alive than to bring them in dead. And making sure a poem has the chance to come alive in the classroom is simply a matter of reading it out loud. You can read them yourself or you can have your students do it, but the important thing is to put the poems in a living human context by giving them a human voice to speak through.

Thomas Johnson, editor of the small poetry magazine, Stinktree, recently did an issue for the OUT LOUD cause. The following is from his editor's note explaining why poems need to have an out loud life:

> I have called this third issue of Stinktree an OUT LOUD issue to hopefully encourage the reader to overthrow the country of the eyeball and discover again the aural world. Reading too much poetry silently to oneself can have a monstrous glacial effect on the senses. The pages slide together coldly and advance right over the top of the skull. Many times a poem demands that tongue and teeth get moving. It wants a little blood and warmth. It wants to travel around the side of the head instead of being forced along the catwalk of the optic nerve. Perhaps some of you will be moved to attempt giving voice to the poems in this issue. As readers we often deny whole areas of possibility and send the eye out to work like a road gang on a group of poems. Two empty hands are needed to pull the poem up from the page.
>
> from Stinktree No. 3

Poems will only have life in the classroom when we, the teachers, start letting the blood, some of ours and some of the students', flow back into them.

8

Selected Anthologies

The New American Poetry
edited by Donald M. Allen
Grove Press, 1960

Naked Poetry
edited by Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey
Bobbs-Merrill, 1969

New American and Canadian Poetry
edited by John Gill
Beacon Press, 1971

Contemporary American Poetry
edited by Donald Hall
Penguin Books, 1971

New Poets of England and America
edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack
Meridian Books, 1962

Quickly Aging Here
edited by Geof Hewitt
Doubleday Anchor, 1969

The Contemporary American Poets
edited by Mark Strand
Meridian Books, 1969

Pocket Book of Modern Verse
edited by Oscar Williams
Washington Square Press, 1970

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berry, Wendell. Openings. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968.

Bly, Robert. Silence in the Snowy Fields. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1962.

Bruce, Lennart. "Moments of Doubt," Tennessee Poetry Journal. Vol. 2, No. 3.

Frost, Robert. The Complete Poems of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. 1967.

Ignatow, David. Rescue the Dead Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968.

Johnson, Thomas. "Etcetcetc," Stinktree No. 3, 1973.

Matthews, William. Ruining the New Road. New York: Random House, 1970.

Mooney, Stephen Selves Martin, Tennessee: Tennessee Poetry Press, 1968.

Nowlan, Alden. Playing the Jesus Game. Trumanburg, New York: New Books, 1970.

Snyder, Gary. Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems. San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1969.

Stafford, William. Traveling through the Dark. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

Strand, Mark. Reasons for Moving. New York: Atheneum, 1968.

Williams, William Carlos. Selected Poems. New York: New Direction Books, 1968.

Wright, James. The Collected Poems. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971.